<Research Note>

Iconic Actions and the Iconic Block: The Quest for Traditional Identity in the Global Community*

Miyanaga Kuniko

1. The Iconic Block against Global Discourse

"Think globally and act locally." This business strategy has probably been more popularly accepted and implemented under the term "glocal" and "glocalization" in Japan than in any other part of the world today. Although already inferred, the Japanese tendency is to emphasize harmony, business people admit that they take energy from the struggle between the global and the local. They are aware of the complexity of today's world, and of the tension between global economic integration and local tradition.

G. H. Mead recognizes individuals as agents that mediate the gap between global and local. In his already classical work, he identifies the possibility of realizing a global, democratic community at the individual level of social interaction. He locates his idea of democracy primarily in diplomacy, or the creation of "a community based simply on the ability of all individuals to converse with each other through use of the same significant symbols."[1] In doing so, he suggests that the "universe of discourse which deals simply with the highest abstractions opens the door for the interrelationship of the different groups in their different characters."[2] Instead of groups trying to eliminate each other by force, conflicts between groups should "lead to a dominance of one group over another by the maintenance of the other groups."[3]

This rather old-fashioned proposition of democracy is still relevant to us today, as Mead insists on a universe of discourse at the highest level of abstraction. "The concept of democracy, highly abstract and universal, should be expressed in concrete social organization consisting of individuals who achieve self-realization through one another."[4] Individual members must realize their abstract ideas through interactions and relationships in daily life with others. A strategy in today's global business community, "Think globally, act locally," captures Mead's proposition to relate the global and the local through a cycle between global discourse in abstraction, and self-realization localized through concrete daily actions. Abstract laws and rules must assert themselves through their agents in concrete action, and local agents must be able to bring their practices to a higher levels of abstraction. This two-way cycle

* This article is a summary of the argument in my manuscript *Iconic Action* (for a book with a tentative title) as of January 23, 2011, based on my presentation at Japan Anthropology Workshop (JAWS) in March 2010.

contains a momentum for the progress of the humankind, and democracy not only depends on this cycle but also expresses its momentum throughout history.

This two-way cycle, however, is not fully functional in Japanese society, as its members are epistemologically restricted from the use of higher levels of abstraction. This is *the iconic block*. I would first like to illustrate this theme, in brief, through their methods of assimilating English, where their problem surfaces. Then I would like to identify the nature of this restrictive system through the examination of a religious group in Japan, where the problem is typified.

In English, a shift between the concrete and the abstract constitutes a conceptual process of analysis. The language enforces the speaker to move between these two levels.[5] The concrete is captured through observations and is subject to analyses. This enables the speaker to identify any rules behind it by shifting to the abstract. When this movement is organized among more than one speaker, it becomes what is defined as dialogue. The speaker goes out of his own fixed frame of mind taking advantage of the feedbacks from others.[6] This conceptual process of reasoning distinctive to English makes it a good candidate for a global language that fulfills the conditions proposed by Mead enabling democracy. In this sense, the development within the English language from traditionally morphological to presently analytical orientations has been crucial for the modern scientific community and the Western history of modernization.

The problem surfaces in the Japanese way of learning English, particularly in their difficulty of relating to the two levels of articulation, concrete and abstract. The point of reference in English offered in the combination of these two levels of epistemology becomes obscure in English education in Japan. Stories, the common means for communication in Japanese, can be told without stepping into the realm of the abstract. Rich imageries in Japanese artistically organize sentiments and actions, which is highly valued in Japanese society. Stories are better means to articulate this organization in the chronological delineation of the concrete. The use of abstract thinking is limited to the sciences, because it does not articulate sentiments or related actions. Thus, the term "glocal" in Japan has its specific emphasis on the local side. This has also led to the wide conviction that, for English education to be practical, it too should primarily focus on the concrete and on chronological reasoning. Modern English is too confrontational to the Japanese in its analytical style.[7] English education in stories reduces the impact of confrontation, but at the same time, it loses an advantage that the analytical reasoning promotes. This selective approach in English education among the Japanese reveals their preference, whether intentional or not, for the concrete over the abstract. Even though they are urged to learn English to survive under progressive globalization, they are unaware that abstract reasoning is its primary requirement for survival.

The same structure which ties the Japanese to the concrete is more precisely articulated in traditional religious systems including a group from contemporary Japanese society called the Sekai Mahikari Bunmei Kyodan (The World Divine Light Civilization Association—SMBK—). The group emerged in the middle of the twentieth century and still grows in number in the twenty-first century slowly. My intention is to show in this example: (1) How and why the epistemological structure

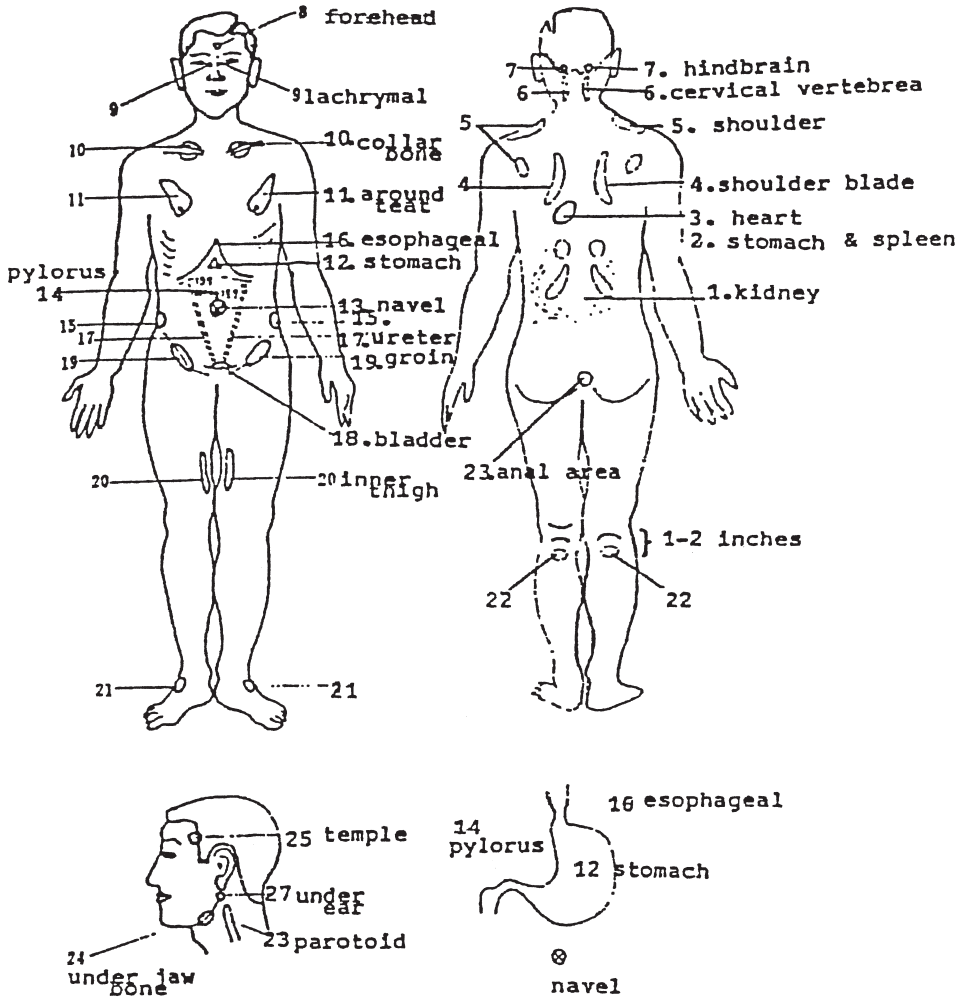

Diagram 1

ties the reasoning process to the concrete, in witch body and sentiment become an exclusive point of focus, and (2) how and why the same structure blocks the reasoning process from going to the abstract out of the concrete or the given. For this purpose, the second half of the discussion will be a reinterpretation of the first half from the Functionalist approach, whereas the first half will remain within a Phenomenologist trend after E. E. Evans-Pritchard, Kenelm Burridge and C. Levi-Strauss. In our example, SMBK's focus is on the human body which is made into an elaborate and exclusive point of reference. Setting this epistemological focus on the body, the group is dedicated to the physiological conditioning of mind in ritual, which is defined here as "iconic action."

For believers, the ultimate goal is to become a "master of spirits" through iconic actions. The whole belief system is built and materialized through the practice of purification activities. Iconic actions here function in two ways: Diseases situate the point of reference in the body (Diagram 1), and the spirits of the dead add moral val-

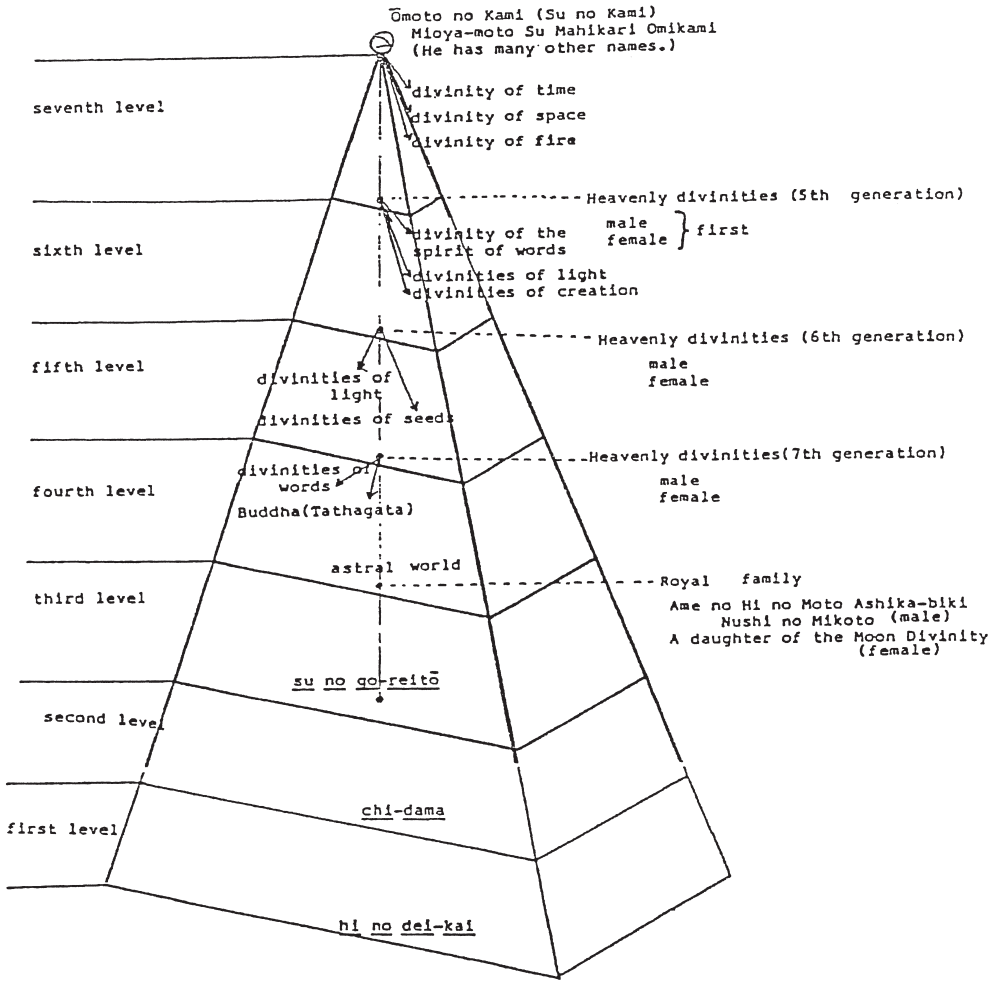

Diagram 2

ues to diseases. Altogether, iconic actions impose the given hierarchy of values through purification activities in which the point of reference is specified. Believers see the hierarchy of values in diseases through the spirits of the dead. On the occasion of purification activities, the iconic actions bring this hierarchy of values (Diagram 2) into reality.

Primarily through repetition, iconic actions structure the body's movements and related sensations into a system whose meanings are articulated in the rich imagery for which the doctrine is organized. The entire community is designed to be complete within iconic actions and doctrinal interpretations: Doctrine directs actions and the actions confirm the doctrine. In this closed but secure system, individual believers are encouraged to express their anxieties and safely re-structure the relationships between body and mind, until they become convinced that they are "healed." Here there is an ultimate feeling of security which, as Levi-Strauss discusses, cures some symptomatic problems caused by the lack of security. In turn,

any removal of this security would be defined as sorcery. Through senior members, believers unveil a long story about their daily-life experiences under the guidance of the spirits of the dead, as it explains the meaning of life interpreted in the given hierarchy of values.

2. Iconic Action

Iconic actions organize experience into a specific relationship between the signifier and the referent. According to the definition originally given by Charles Sanders Peirce, icons are either images or diagrams, which signify the object through unconventional resemblance. Refining this classical definition of iconicity as sign–signifier by resemblance, Catherine Z. Elgin has developed the semiotics of icons. She redefines the meaning of "resemblance" by redefining icons, "Whether S is an icon of o depends not just on whether there is a resemblance between S and o, but on what S refers to via that resemblance."[8] The iconic signifier S and the referent o must share some "feature" or the "configuration of the images" in-between mediating their resemblance. For example, the icon of a king displays the configuration of images about the real king. The icon of Santa Clause displays the configuration of the images of Santa Clause.

As Elgin suggests, what truly matters here is not the resemblance between S and o but the configuration itself. Icons present and show the content of this configuration of images and connote its rich shades of meaning in its display. Resemblance may simply be a result of the display of this configuration of images. When the icon S has the referent o in reality, as in the case of the king, the icon presents and shows what the king should be. As a result, the king in reality and the king's icon show a resemblance unique but acceptable to viewers. In this case, the icon of the king S denotes the real king through their resemblance in the shared configuration.

Vernon Howard extends the argument to music. In spite of differences between visions and sounds, he captures this same structure in music between the music played and the music to be played. Referring to Susanne Langer's definition of symbols, he says, "Although she avoided the word 'icon,' preferring instead the phrase 'presentational symbol,' this is Langer's version of the music as icon thesis."[9] What he implies through his thesis is that icons as presentational symbols constitute the vocabulary of music only to be defined through playing the notes. When they are played, symbols themselves are displayed in music, in contrast to the vocabulary of the language of what she calls discursive symbols in Peirce's sense, consisting of "conventional" links between S and o. Presentational symbols, unlike the vocabulary of discursive language, are defined in themselves within the configuration of images. In doing so, especially icons like key words among them, they evoke this configuration as a key would unlock a door.

In the group's system of closed configuration, the human body becomes a point of reference to the hierarchy of values which this system is ultimately designed for. Diseases situate the point of reference in the body of a believer; the spirits of the dead combines it to the hierarchy of values. By suggesting the resemblance between the body movements of the believer (as S) and that of the spirits of the dead (as o), the spirits are interpreted as a real being. They emerge in the scene in the same way

as Santa Clause is at Christmas. The configuration of the belief system is shown in the practice of the purification activities. Iconic actions, displaying defining images through resemblance, make their actors experience the specific relationship between these images and the given hierarchy of values. As Elgin suggests here, in secular scenes, the referent may appear to be much more arbitrary, with its identification depending on the classificatory practice in the culture of wider society in general. I believe that retaining tradition in secular scenes of modern society today shows a desire to retain a more specific, non-arbitrary relationship with the referent. The commitment to such a relationship through iconic actions in religious groups is the fulfillment of this desire.

3. Conditioned Feelings

A dichotomy from the Japanese tradition, *giri* and *ninjō* (moral codes of obligation and natural humane feelings), still now best articulates this non-arbitrary relationship between the imagery and the referent. In the Japanese tradition, as it is well represented in SMBK, the relationship between obligations and feelings is not arbitrary. A specific configuration is present to link these two to be reciprocated in actions. The linkage appears through physical sensations and directs actions. Compassion towards the subject, for example, is a *ninjō* (feeling)—a sentiment culturally organized in a strong physical feeling which directs a specific action. It is linked to a specific image which contains a specific value such as a merciful king. Here, the king becomes an icon when he spontaneously acts in the defining image of the king according to the configuration laid in the culture. He exemplifies the value "merciful" in the display of the defining image. This image and the configuration remain implicit, until the king successfully displays it in his action. The configuration appears in him. Its embodiment makes him acceptable as the iconic figure.

This process suggests that the configuration of images promotes a specific hierarchy of values in spontaneous actions. Thus, in the other extreme, if the person's feeling does not fit in the given cultural instruction and if he still insists acting upon it, he may likely become a tragic hero. In contrast to the iconic king, the tragic hero displays a gap between the feeling and the value. Heroes and heroines in Monzaemon Chikamatsu's tragic plays provoke disharmony between the spontaneous, internal feelings and the external, cultural values. In this agony of disharmony, the value of obligation emerges as a code against the natural feelings of a good human being. Codes are associated with disharmony when they are made explicit. They should remain implicit being contained in good, natural feelings and be expressed in spontaneous actions. Explicit codes are imagined negatively and tolerated only for the purpose of maintaining order.

In the SMBK example, this process is well represented in the way that the spirits of the dead mistakenly deviate from the moral code and then show reconciliation through repentance and the correction of mistakes. Ultimately, they try to become an iconic figure of moral embodiment or an exemplar of the hierarchy of values. When the feeling and the obligation are harmonized, they are expressed in a solid and unified image which directs spontaneous actions. Here is no recognition of the objectified moral code independent from given imageries. Icons provoke these col-

lective imageries through their agents both human and spiritual. The SMBK cosmology is designed to ensure this icon's function. Presentational symbols, with icons as key words, express, define and impose the configuration between the basic elements—feelings (sentiments), values and actions. SMBK local centers are organized into a stage for iconic figures, both living and dead, to display their resemblance through the embodiments of concrete and specific imageries.

Although SMBK denies some mainstream Japanese values, the group in its extremity exemplifies the implicit but basic value orientation which today's mainstream Japanese are unaware of. The group's practice reveals an implicit code in Japanese society that social codes essentially should remain implicit, and that their objectification is not desirable. As is articulated in both SMBK and the traditional dichotomy of obligations and feelings, explicit codes are imagined negatively and tolerated only for the purpose of maintaining order. Here, individuation is commonly regarded as a sign for deviating from the order represented in the collective imageries. SMBK treats individuation as defilement to be purified, whereas mainstream Japanese culture rejects it completely as an "American disease." Even though their reasons for dismissal are different, their conclusions are the same.

This basic orientation still continues deep down in Japan today and epistemologically blocks a modern democratic practice to question the status of existing implicit codes and bring them up to a modern discourse. The mainstream Japanese regard the constant demand for objectification under globalization as necessary but accept it with resentment. Even in the mainstream, this traditionalist sentiment has a place to develop. Although the majority of mainstream Japanese would dismiss SMBK as a cult, the group is able to attract members from the mainstream where people hold the same sentiment and value orientation. What makes this group appear to be unique is the involvement of spirits. However, the group, in fact, exemplifies a mainstream value orientation in its attachment to the specific, non-arbitrary relationships between the imagery and the referent.

4. The Company Ethos

In spite of its uniqueness, the study of SMBK in an anthropological perspective reveals an aspect of Japanese culture which remains implicit in mainstream society. The business communities in Japan function through this highly metaphorical relationship between their collective ideology and their actors. The ideology ensures an organized system of expressing feelings through collective actions. This is referred to as *the company ethos*, a favorite word among Japanese business people, and is embodies a collective company sentiment. The ethos directs specific actions. The company culture is actively designed to insure and provide a collective sentiment. What are common between religious and secular groups in this sense are their specific, non-arbitrary relationships between the signifier and the referent, or between the given imageries and the hierarchy of values. Group members are epistemologically tied to the concrete and remain unable to unleash themselves to enter an analytical process through objectification. They thrive to collectively embody the given hierarchy of values.

The company ethos makes Japanese companies closed from the outside. A partic-

ular style of lobbying between business groups is institutionalized to prevent group members' individual exposure to other groups. The gap between the two different ethoses of two different groups cannot be filled through spontaneous interactions between the two who happen to be there together. The configuration of the company ethos is too group-specific and closed against each other. To fill this gap, Japanese tradition provides contemporary Japanese society with pre-negotiation lobbying methods which are actively in function. What is described in terms of "connection (between people)" means the relationship accessible to this lobbying activity. Now the question is, as I asked at the beginning of this article, how does this Japanese style of "glocalization" find its place in the global community? How can the ethos of Japanese business communities relate to the reality of the global world outside?

English and the English speaking culture are good examples of modern discourse where the physical body is no longer an independent point of reference. Human experiences are certainly enabled through our five senses but interpreted through the abstract. The speaker must organize their point of reference by moving between the two levels, between the abstract and concrete. Grammar serves the speaker by organizing this movement into a personal style as to reach out and capture their external reality. The speaker must be in control of this dynamic process.[10] Globalization is progressing along this line under the leadership of the global scientific community.

Focusing on the concrete under progressive globalization, the group puts itself under a "double bind," and applies a common Japanese solution to this problem: Seclusion. Historically, Japan was withdrawn from the wider global society for two and a half centuries in the Pre-modern Period. Even today, a number of the young (referred often as *hikikomori*) confine themselves in their rooms at home. There are also crucial examples of large corporations' withdrawing from global markets. Under progressive globalization however, withdrawal cannot be the answer. It even attracts their rival alien corporations into Japan from the wider global community.

The end of the thread of this problem is more epistemological than economic or social; those who wish to preserve their tradition through economic and social activities should be able to elevate themselves and their traditions to global discourse more actively at the higher levels of abstraction. The key word here is *factuality*. If there is an insistence that tradition is more factual than modern science, it must be articulated in the global discourse. In this context, assimilating skills of abstraction and self-objectification through English may be more significant than ever considered. Though it may sound paradoxical, tradition, together with the abundant methods of English articulation, may better serve in the process of progressive globalization, rather than to simply be an obsolete source of inspiration. Individuals in the periphery of Japanese society may also find more active roles in the global community. Could they become a new transcendental agent[11] that would revive local traditions into new global standards? New approaches to English learning in Japan may therefore epistemologically free some Japanese from their inescapable "double bind" and encourage dialogues or dialectics in the contemporary global discourse.

Notes

1) George H. Mead, *Mind, Self & Society*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955, first published

in 1934), 282.

2) George H. Mead, 284.
3) George H. Mead, 284.
4) George H. Mead, 287–289.
5) Kuniko Miyanaga, "Yuui no jijitsu-sei" [Advanced Factuality] in *Gurō-baru-ka to paradokkusu* [Globalization and Paradox], (Kyoto: Sekai shisō sha, 2007), 203–208 (in Japanese).
6) Kuniko Miyanaga, "Updating the Classics," *Journal of Anthropological Society of Oxford* vol. 30, no. 2, Trinity, 2002, 178–180.
7) This situation is typical of "Local universal" and often confuses the speaker. Kenelm Burridge, *Someone No One: An Essay on Individuality*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1979), 172.
8) Catherine Z. Elgin, "Index and Icon Revisited," Vincent M. Colapietro and Thomas M. Olshewsky eds., *Peirce's Doctrine of Signs: Theory, Applications, and Connection*, (Berlin: Moulton de Gruyter, 1996), 181–189, esp. 183.
9) Vernon Howard, "Music as Icon: A Critiques of Twentieth Century Music semiotic," Vincent M. Colapietro and Thomas M. Olshewsky eds., *Pierce's Doctrine of Signs*, (New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1996), 317.
10) This prerequisite of control is further evidence of why self has been such a primary focus in modern Western history—from Descartes through Kant to Mead. Unlike the Japanese example of SMBK fixed to a given hierarchy of values, the Western self is engaged in a quest for advanced factuality in one's external reality.
11) Kuniko Miyanaga, *The Creative Edge*, (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1991).